

## Semi-autonomous blended learning for Intercultural Communication in the Euregio Meuse-Rhine

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### Abstract

INTERcCOM (Intercultural communication in the Euregio Meuse-Rhine) is an Interreg project co-ordinated by the Center of Applied Linguistics - Hasselt University. The project's aims are to improve mutual communication and to simplify studying and working in the EMR, composed of 3 different languages and 5 different cultures.

To achieve this goal, a scientific research consisting of a language and a culture part was undertaken, in which we sought an answer to the following main questions:

- What interference errors and other recurrent errors do native youngsters and young Polish and Turkish immigrants keep on making in the other region's languages?
- What are the cultural characteristics of each of the regions, and those of their native youngsters and young Polish and Turkish immigrants, in particular? Are there many resemblances or differences?

Based on the research results, e-learning modules are being developed. The design for a web-based remedial course for improving HE Students' skills in French, Dutch and German was the common basis for different teams of teaching professionals in the different regions to start creating tailor-made exercise material based on the inventories of interference and other recurrent language errors and the contrastive cultural profiles assembled for each couple of regions.

The learning modules, characterized by a communicative approach and created with dedicated language & culture authoring software, will be suited for fully independent learning as well as for semi-autonomous blended learning (guided by a teacher). Thanks to multi-labeling, students can assemble their learning path on the basis of different selection parameters.

## 0. Introduction

This paper reports on the progress of the European research and development project INTERcCOM - Intercultural Communication in the Euregio Meuse-Rhine. This project (2009-2013) is funded under the INTERREG IVA programme of the European Union and is coordinated by the Center Applied Linguistics of Hasselt University in Belgium.

The Euregio Meuse-Rhine (EMR) is one of the first institutionalised E.U. border regions collaborating internationally. It is composed of 5 subregions from Belgium (Dutch-speaking province of Limburg, French-speaking Liège region, German-speaking Community of Belgium), the Netherlands (Southern part of the Dutch province of Limburg) and Germany (Aachen region) which are situated around the river Meuse and west of the river Rhine. The EMR has about 3,9 million inhabitants and covers a geographical area of about 11.000 km<sup>2</sup>. Its subregions constitute a sort of mini-Europe with provinces or administrative entities from 3 countries, representing 3 different languages - plus two regional variants of 2 out of the 3 - and 5 different cultures. But above that, the EMR counts large immigrant groups, out of which the Turkish (old migration wave of 1960s + newcomers) and Polish (old migration wave of interwar period + newcomers) communities are two of the most important ones.

## 1. Justification

Due to historical and geographical reasons, young people from the EMR tend to leave their home region as soon as they start their Higher Education and later professional career. When they undertake an exchange, students tend to choose a more distant and "exotic" destination. This is a regrettable reality since the proximity of three different languages and five different cultures offers great opportunities for foreign language learning and practising. As a result, the EMR suffers from brain drain, and there is a need to make studying and working in the EMR more attractive. On the other hand, the EMR is faced with a rather high drop-out rate of immigrant students in higher education. Research has shown that an insufficient mastery of the language of instruction is one of the important explaining factors. This also hinders fluency in foreign languages.

Despite the proximity of foreign language speaking communities and years of language education, teachers can observe students making the same persistent language errors over and over again. This reality also applies in

other border regions. These errors are often caused by interference of the mother tongue or another foreign language, mostly English. In addition, a lot of stereotyped ideas about the cultures across the border exist among youngsters of the different EMR subregions which can be explained simply by the fact that there is not enough interaction between the border regions. Stereotypes are often based on a negative image fed by the media.

## 2. Project aims

The INTERcCOM project's general aims are to optimise studying and working in the EMR and to prevent the brain drain and dropout of youngsters from higher education. It thereby wants to build a stronger Euregio, taking more benefit from its geographical, social and economical potential. It wants to do so by improving language and culture skills of EMR youngsters in the three languages and cultures of the Euregio.

The operational aims were to carry out a research on the significant cultural differences within the EMR and to inventorise the most important language errors in the different languages in order to develop learning modules for semi-autonomous blended learning.

Therefore, a consortium of seven partners was set up, including the universities of Hasselt (BE, promoter), Aachen (DE, Rheinisch-Westphälische Technische Hochschule Aachen) and Liège (BE), the university colleges of Maastricht-Heerlen (NL, Hogeschool Zuyd) and of Hasselt (BE, Provinciale Hogeschool Limburg, contractant), the Gymnasium St. Leonhard (DE) and Hasselt University spin-off CommArt International (BE).

## 3. Research questions and methodology

The project is structured in a research and a development phase and has two large parts: a language part and a culture part.

### 3.1 Language

In a first phase, the project wanted to investigate which interference errors and other language errors native youngsters make in the languages of the other EMR border regions and also which interference errors and other language errors Polish and Turkish youngsters make in the EMR languages. A sub question was whether those errors are similar to native youngsters' errors.

Frequent language errors were inventorised per language couple (NL, FR, DE, TR, PL as mother tongue to NL, FR, DE as target language). As an example of one category of errors, Belgian youngsters speaking French often wrongly pronounce nasal sounds, because these sounds do not exist in their native

language Dutch. The inventories of frequent language errors were made based on existing publications in the domain (source language-target language specific) by teachers of the target language as a foreign language, well experienced in foreign language didactics. A distinction was made between general language errors (e.g. interlanguage mistakes caused by overgeneralisation) and interference errors, labeled as such whenever the origin of the mistake could be found in the learner's mother tongue or in English, which is generally the EMR youngsters' dominant foreign language.

The errors were then labeled by native speaker partners as (1) very disturbing for native speakers, (2) having a stigmatising effect on the person making the errors, (3) hindering communication and causing misunderstandings and finally (4) non disturbing for native speakers.

These inventories (4 for French, 4 for German and 4 for Dutch) of pronunciation, orthographic, morphological, syntactical, lexical and pragmatic errors were the content basis for the development of remedial courses for EMR students, which are currently being developed by L2 teaching professionals. Each time, their work is validated by the native speaker partners, also language training professionals.

### 3.2 Culture

The research questions of the culture part were the following:

- Which are the cultural characteristics of each of the subregions and of their migrant youngsters?
- To what extent do subregions differ in the field of cultural characteristics?
- Which are the cultural characteristics of the 1st generation of Turkish and Polish youngsters?
- In what way are cultural characteristics of Polish and Turkish youngsters different from the cultural profiles of each subregion?

The project's research phase focused on culture skills. Indeed, good language skills are not sufficient for functioning/feeling well in a new region, as stated by the literature in the field of cross-cultural research (e.g., Hofstede, 1980, 2006; Pinto, 2000). Each individual belonging to a specific - in this case geographical - group, shares the group's values, norms, rules of conduct. These are passed on from generation to generation and are not genetically determined but nurtured through permanent contacts with one's environment. Culture influences verbal (as well as non-verbal) behavior. A common language does not equal a common culture: e.g. Dutch and Flemish people speak (a geographic variant of) the same standard language but come

with different cultural characteristics. An insufficient knowledge of the other person's culture leads to miscommunication and misunderstandings even when there is no more language barrier. In such cases, one can only perceive the other culture through the glasses of his or her own culture. Very often, things that are different are not well understood and are perceived as bad, leading to negative, often resistant, stereotypes (e.g. "Germans are stiff" - "Belgians are stupid" - "Dutchmen are loud"). Generalisations ignore factors of individual personality and of one's belonging to diverse cultures defined by among other things sex, age, social class.

For several decades, well known studies (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Trompenaars, 2008; Hall 1976) measure and compare national, larger regional (Flemish-Walloon) cultures. But so far no comparative research on the EMR subregions has been carried out.

Cultural dimensions which were analysed in the Interccom survey research are:

- Monochronism - Polychronism
- Individualism - Collectivism
- Externalism - Internalism
- Universalism - Particularism
- Power distance
- Masculinity - Femininity
- Uncertainty avoidance
- Achievement - Ascription
- Long-term orientation - Short-term orientation
- High context - Low context
- Formal - Informal

The results of the culture research are currently under publication.

#### **4. e-Learning modules for semi-autonomous blended learning**

The project's ultimate aim is to develop 30 e-learning modules based on the results of the research phase, helping EMR youngsters to communicate better

in the foreign languages of the Euregio and acquire a better insight into the other's culture.

Each module combines one subregion (mother tongue (Dutch NL, Belgian NL, Belgian FR, German DE, Belgian DE, TR, PL) / source culture) with each of the other subregions (target language/culture). This will allow a tailor-made approach, in which the learning material takes the mother tongue and culture of the student as a starting point to learn a foreign language/culture (contrastive didactic approach).

## 5. Design e-learning modules

The development phase started with the creation of a design for the language and culture learning modules. A number of theoretical principles were at the basis of this design (e.g., Chapelle, 1998; Hubbard, 2006; Hubbard & Siskin, 2004). The modules can be defined as tutorial CALL, which on the tutor-tool paradigm/continuum is positioned on the side of the computer as tutor. The modules were designed to act as a learning program having a recognisable teaching presence.

The teaching presence in the learning modules is expressed through three different tutorial modes (Hubbard, 2006):

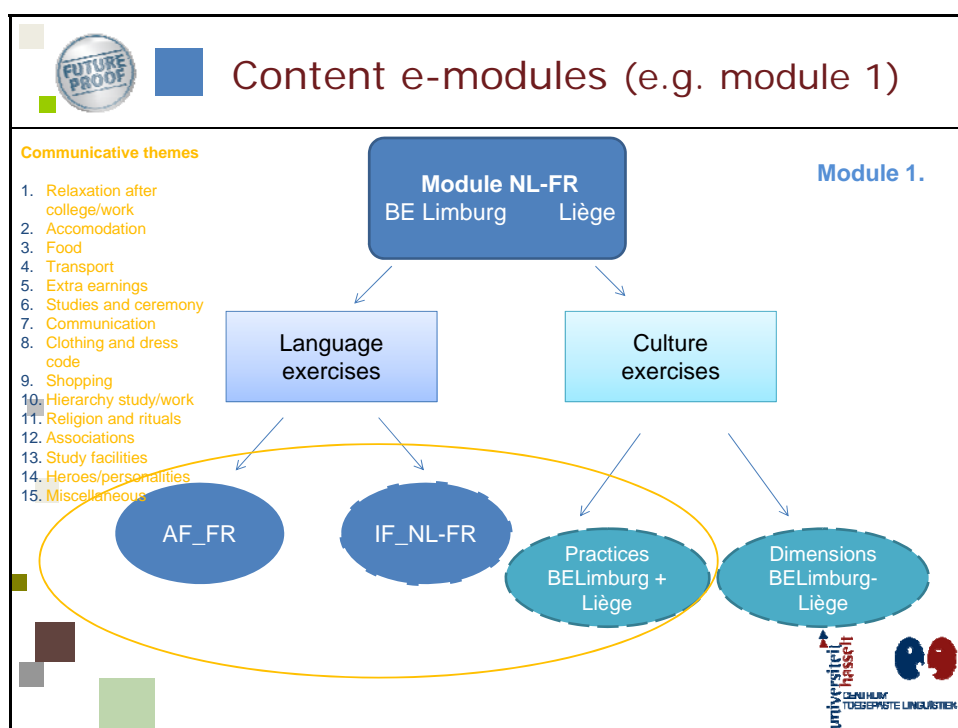
- Presentation: the program provides information (i.c. in target language) using text, tables, schemes, pictures, video (interaction limited to clicking, pausing, repeating). Limited interactivity.
- Exploration: learners do the asking clicking on links, pictures, audio, looking for info with the option of skipping info already known. Interactivity limited to clicking through the information.
- Interrogation: the computer does the asking, offering various types of activities, and prompting the student for a response, providing feedback (correct and incorrect answers, score, comment) on the accuracy of that response. High degree of interactivity between the student and the program.

As such, the modules will be suited for full self-study (autonomous learning), but also for semi-autonomous blended learning. In the latter case, self-study based on the individual use of e-modules is combined with a physical face-to-face or on-line coach. As a remedial course, based on error analysis of the specific student target groups, teachers can assign certain exercises to students according to their individual weaknesses. In the case of face-to-face sessions, parts of the course can be handled during general language classes, with the possibility of discussing specific issues with the group.

Although the learning contents characterise by a focus on forms (based on anticipated errors), the learning modules have a communicative goal: to learn to communicate better and more effectively in authentic, real-life situations typically faced by most HE students.

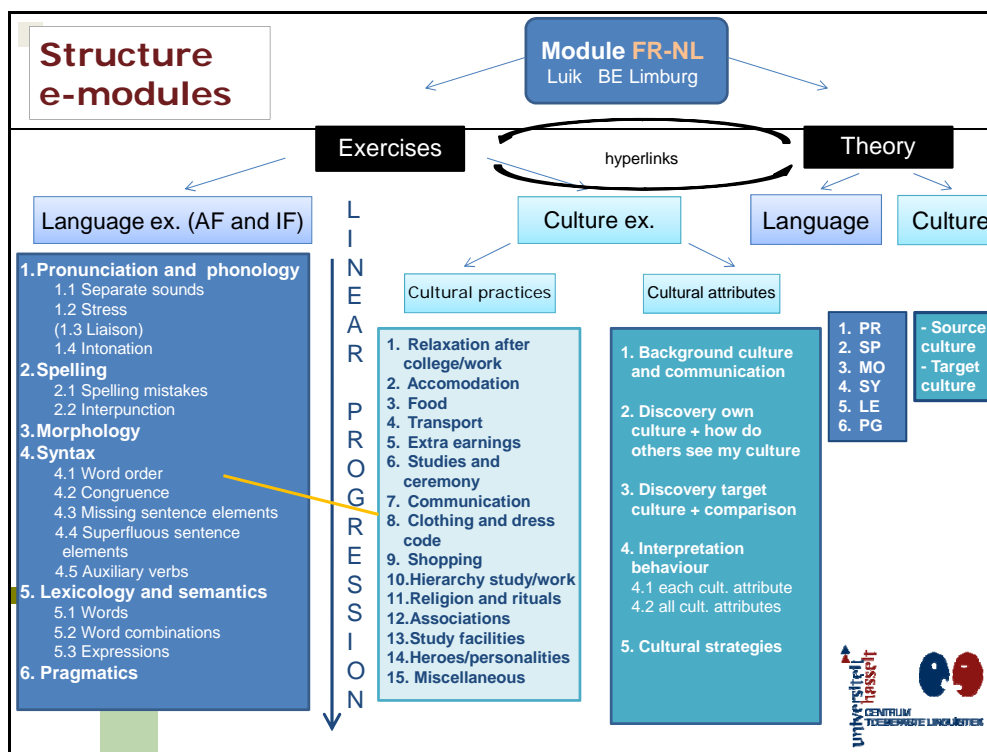
For the development of the learning modules, dedicated authoring software for language and culture learning on the web was developed. Exercise templates for all language competences were devised. Each one offers the possibility to integrate all types of multimedia files (audio, text, pictures and graphs, video). The navigation architecture was built in such a way that different paths through the learning contents are possible. These contents (exercises and theory pages) are encoded and stored in an on-line database. Different filters are offered to the students and teachers, enabling them to compose individualised learning paths, according to their competence level, learning preferences, linguistic and cultural background, interests, etc.

The following overview presents the contents of a module:



The language part contains exercises remediating general errors (e.g. caused by overgeneralisation) as well as exercises covering typical errors caused by interference of the learner's mother tongue (e.g. lexical false friends). The culture part contains two parts: on the one hand exercises describing cultural practises of the target region (e.g. the Liège region) and on the other hand exercises explaining the cultural characteristics (cf. above-mentioned description of culture) of this region. The exercises on both language and cultural practises are situated around 14 communicative contexts predefined according to the project's target group of students.

The following scheme shows how users can navigate linearly through a module.



But the learning contents can also be structured and presented differently, based on e.g. the following filters:

- communicative context
- type of language errors (general errors - interference errors)
- weight of language errors (very disturbing and stigmatising, disturbing, non disturbing to native speakers)
- language category (pronunciation, spelling, morphology, syntax, lexicology and semantics, pragmatics)
- didactic progression - difficulty level (reception-reproduction, synthesis, test)

## 6. Conclusion

By the end of February 2013, all 30 learning modules will be finalised, containing roughly between 300 and 400 exercises and 100 theory schemes each. To assure a maximum use and spread of the learning modules across the EMR, 20 400 e-learning modules will be distributed for free in the EMR in the spring of 2013. They will be distributed by Hasselt University's spin-off CommArt International ([www.commart.eu](http://www.commart.eu)). More information about the



project and CTL-UHasselt's other research and development projects can be found at [www.uhasselt.be/ctl](http://www.uhasselt.be/ctl).

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